

### TOPIC 3; PERCEPTION

#### [A] READING;

D. Hume; *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Sec - Hume presents his very simple version of the argument from illusion.

B. Russell; *Problems of Philosophy* Ch 1.- classic presentation of something like the argument from illusion and defence of a sense datum view.

A. J. Ayer; *Problem of Knowledge* Ch 3 – Ayer argues in a lively way for the traditional model of perception, but presents an understanding of the issues which is unusual.

G. Pitcher; *A Theory of Perception* Pt 1 – an excellent critical analysis of the classical arguments in favour of sense data.

J.L.Austin; *Sense and Sensibilia* – an entertaining and brilliant criticism of the traditional discussions of perception.

#### [B] Notes;

1. Practically all philosophers have written about perception, eg., Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Mill, Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein. Why has it been rated as so important? Three things seem to stand out. (a) Perception is our main source of knowledge of the world. We assume that if we acquire knowledge then there is some answer to the question – how did you acquire it? The answer need not be known to the knower. Perception is our usual method. Thus if I ask – how do you know that there is a white board here? The answer is – we can see that it is there. Moreover, the idea that if you can perceive X then you can get knowledge of X is obvious – so obvious that it might count as a priori. (b) We think about the external world – eg we think about this white board. We are able to single that object out in thought because we perceive it. Perception places us in a relation to objects to enable us to think about them. (c) However this is explained exactly, our perception of the world is essential to our concept formation. For example, it is my perception of eg sour things that enables me to acquire the concept sour in terms of which I can then classify things.

This importance is also reflected in the weight we attach to the fact that certain people lack certain forms of perception. It is important to be told that eg someone is blind or deaf – such a lack has a colossal significance in their lives. It is one of the first things we would say about them.

2. Until the mid twentieth century there was virtually unanimous agreement amongst reflective philosophers concerning perception, although the language used varies. We can state the standard view in two propositions;

[A] we do not directly, immediately, really, perceive external spatial objects (eg., tables, chairs, mountains etc)

[B] we do directly etc perceive ideas, sense data, *sensa*, images etc.

[A] is negative, [B] is positive.

These propositions call for initial explanation in two respects.

What are sense data, ideas etc? They are theoretical postulates, and like such postulates in general to explain them requires filling in the answers to various questions. What sort of existence do they have? Two aspects are important. They are private to a subject and not public. They have a subjective existence – they are like pains and exist only when apprehended or perceived. This is their general nature. What further properties do they have?

Their role is really to explain appearances, and so they are postulated as having the properties that explain that. For example, if you are perceiving a sense datum and that amounts to an appearance of redness then the sense datum is actually red.

What is direct or immediate perception? This way of speaking is not usually defined. One rough explanation is this; consider ordinary vision. Follow your gaze outwards. The first thing you so to speak arrive at you can attend to and ask – what is that? – designating that object. It makes sense of what traditional philosophers said to suggest that when they talk about direct perception they mean – the relation in which you stand to that first thing you come to following your attention outwards.

The traditional claim is that actually the first thing you really come to is an internal image like thing, something subjective, and not actually something in the world.

3. Why was this view so widely accepted? It represented part of the mind set of many, and they did not always argue for it. However, there are two standard arguments – called the argument from Illusion and the argument from Hallucination. The most important thing at this introductory stage is to understand these arguments and the theory they lead to, and to have some criticisms of them.

What is meant by illusion and hallucination? The category of illusion is when someone perceives an object which is not F but which appears to the percipient to be F. A standard example is the Muller Lyer lines case – where two equal in length lines actually look different in length. The category of hallucination is where one has an experience which seems to be perceptual but no actual object is perceived at all. This can of course happen after taking drugs.

Note that illusions and hallucinations are used in a variety of arguments related to perception, but they are not always used for the same purpose. One role is epistemological. Sometimes it is argued as follows; illusions are possible; unless you know that your current experience is not an illusion you do not really now how the world is; but you do not know that your current experience is not an illusion – so you do not know about the world. This is an epistemological argument from illusion.

Note that this argument merely relies on the possibility of illusions; second it aims to show that there is ignorance, and from ignorance nothing positive can follow, so this use cannot justify any claims about the actual nature of experience.

This epistemological use is not the use relevant to characterising the nature of experience. When you are thinking about arguments from illusions always determine whether the conclusion is epistemological or not.

4. The arguments we are interested in have two premises considered in outline.

1] the Base Case – in illusions (hallucinations) we directly perceive sense data and not external objects

2] the Spreading Step – if this is true of illusions (hallucinations) it is true of all apparently perceptual experiences.

Therefore

C] in all apparently perceptual experiences we directly perceive sense data and not external objects.

Note – such arguments are based on non-standard cases eg illusions because it is thought that in such cases some things are clearer than in the normal case and can then be used to show something about the normal case. This is akin to studying cases where our cognitive systems go wrong to show things about how they work normally – which is quite standard practice in psychology.

Note too – such arguments tend to have a problem. The narrower the base case the more plausible it is to claim that they reveal something, but the narrower the base case the harder it is to generalise the conclusion drawable for them.

5. Let us consider the Illusion argument first. Why accept 1]? The idea is as follows; consider a case where something looks eg white to you, but it is actually blue. It seems that there is something white there presented to you. As they might say; the white expanse is manifestly there. So something is white. Since the external object is not white there must be another thing which is white. This is not an external object, and so must be an inner subjective object, that is, a sense datum. So you directly perceive this object and it would seem not the external object.

6. It is clear that this argument assumes a principle along these lines; if it looks to you as if there is an F then there is an F. Call that the Appearance principle. If that principle is not acceptable then the first main premise of the illusion argument is ungrounded. Why shouldn't we be directly perceiving a blue object which happens to look white? Is this principle true?

7. First, the principle is not true without restriction. Obviously, if something looks to be old it does not follow that something is old. So it must be restricted in its scope. Second, there is no real proof that we must accept the principle. Third, there is strong reason to be sceptical of its truth.

The best way to bring this out is to introduce a terminology that is currently popular, the terms are VEHICLE and CONTENT. The principle can be rephrased as; if F figures in the content of an appearance then there is a vehicle for that content which itself is F.

The problem is that we cannot really match appearance content and vehicle in this way. One point is that perceptual appearances are indeterminate. For example, there can be two lines that you can see and where neither looks longer than the other but they do not look the same length. You just cannot tell. However, objects cannot be indeterminate. So if there are two lines then either they are the same length or one is bigger than the other. We see then that appearance content cannot be carried by a vehicle which is that way.

This suggests that the appearance principle is false, even if it is intuitively plausible.

8. We can introduce another terminology. There is a strong temptation to analyse experience into an act by the subject, say apprehending, and an object, which is apprehended. This is called the ACT/OBJECT analysis. Traditionally this has been done for the having of images, ie there is an image and it is apprehended, and pains, there is a pain and it is apprehended, and also perceptual type experiences, there is a sense datum and it is apprehended. But the case just given brings out that the act-object analysis is dubious. What in general is the alternative? The answer is what is called the ADVERBIAL theory. The idea is that rather than postulate an object to be apprehended we postulate a manner of being conscious – and a manner is an adverbial thing. So to feel a pain is not actually to apprehend an object = a pain, but rather to be conscious in a painful manner. The suggestion eliminates objects.

9. Why did philosophers adopt an act/object analysis? Part of the answer is that they tended to think of vision primarily, and in vision we are familiar with picture perception in which we perceive one object but get a related content. We perceive a board with marks on it but it appears as a face. There is a tendency to internalise such a model.

10 In the argument from hallucination, the base claim is that in hallucinations we directly perceive sense data and not external objects. The latter part of this claim is obviously true, given the definition of hallucination. But how can the argument spread that from the

hallucinatory case? It is pointed out that we cannot distinguish hallucinations from perceptions. But the indistinguishability claim does not require that they are not quite different cases. As Austin pointed out, a real lemon looks exactly the same as a soap lemon. Why should we accept that we directly perceive sense data in hallucinatory cases? In the light of what has just been said, that should be rejected. Hallucinations do not involve sense data.

11. Neither argument seems cogent, and the general conclusion is that no good reason has been given to think that we don't really directly perceive external objects.

12. When philosophers analyse perception their approach is to analyse what it consists in in terms of other psychological states we already know about. One option is to deny that such an analysis is possible. Maybe perception of our environment is one basic sort of mental occurrence. It is unclear whether that is the best we can say.